July. 1964

GEOGRAPHY AND POETRY

Thank you etc.

When Prof. Clinch invited me to speak to the Geography Summer School about Canadian poetry, I began to think about the relationship of literary culture to geography. Knowing some geographers, I am well aware that to them geography is a rich, broad discipline touching indeed almost every aspect of human existence. But today I am concerned with fairly elementary geographical concepts--namely the physical features, the shape, size and climatic conditions of our country and their relationship to poetry.

One of our Canadian critics, Milton Wilson of Toronto, has pleaded for someone to write an essay called the "Geographical Fallacy." He feels that it is dangerous to draw conclusions about the arts from the physical features of the country in which they are produced. It is true that landscape painters paint landscapes but we do not judge such paintings by their accuracy--a camera is surely much more accurate. So with "nature poets"--their poems are not to be judged for their descriptive ability--travel brochures do a much better job of that. Furthermore, nature poetry is only one kind of poetry.

Today especially, very few poets are concerned with "nature" in the sense of the countryside and the simple life. Beginning about the turn of the century, poets began to write of "cityscapes"
and they're likely to have an international, or non-national, non-political, even non-social flavour--much like our modern painters. It is folly to try to relate these contemporary artists to any particular geographical milieu in the elementary sense. Urban geographers, however, especially those concerned with the growth of great modern cities, may certainly have some insight into modern art since that art is largely the reflection of urban existence.

However, in a broader sense, I think geography does throw considerable

light on literary culture--or on the lack, or slow growth of it that we suffer from in Canada.

If Canada were an island--or a sizeable peninsula--or if there were some great natural barriers between us and the United States--we might then have a much easier time establishing a separate Canadian identity and the culture that reflects such an identity. But we have only to look at a map to appreciate most of our difficulties. What we see is a huge continent whose physical lines of communication and whose natural regions all run from north to south. This continent, seen on a political map, is divided in two by that most arbitrary and artificial line which we call a border. South of this line is a densely populated, rich and powerful nation. North of it--north of it lies one of the largest countries in the world in which exists one of the smallest and one of the most quixotic, not to say chaotic nations. Quixotic, I said. Canada exists in defiance of geography. We are a nation of twenty million people, one tenth the population of the United States. If that twenty million all lived in Quebec, or in Newfoundland, or in the Yukon--that is, if we were concentrated in one area where communication and social intercourse could take place easily, then we might more readily produce a literary culture. But of course we are not--we are, as you know, strung out east to west across the country in what looks like, on a population map, a mere fringe on the United States' border. At any one point in that fringe, Canadians have better communication, easier contact and more in common with the people across the border than they have with other Canadians in the widely scattered parts of our country. Add to this the fact that the majority of Canadians share a language with the people of the United States and you will not be surprised at the fact that Canadians are constantly threatened with cultural inundation. If we all spoke French, you see, or better still, Chinese or Hindustani, we might have at least a linguistic barrier between us and the Americans.(It is unfortunate that there is no adjective for "United States"--we have to use the term American--which really is as much ours as theirs.)

So you see, geography, frustrated as it has been by the perversity of history, has so far acted as a deterrent to national culture in Canada. We have spent much of the past hundred years trying to overcome the forces of geography--trying to forge links which will stretch across the country and bind our widely-differing regions together. The railroad was our first real triumph. And more recently the CBC radio and television have helped us immeasurably to keep in touch and to get to know each other--to literally hear and see ourselves as Canadians. And, in the past twenty-five years, we have developed some large cities, where the libraries and universities and art galleries and theatres so necessary to culture are beginning to exist. And we have also the Canada Council, doing a remarkably good job of encouraging artists and making it easier for them to get together. Yet, think of it--this past June the Canadian Learned Societies met in Charlottetown, P.E.I. To participate, some members had to travel 3000 miles across the continent. Aeroplanes help, of course, but it is still a costly and time-consuming trip. Next month the Canada Council is sponsoring a Writers Conference in Gaspé at which many of the writers in Eastern Canada will meet. Without such sponsorship, it is unlikely that they would manage it. And writers need to meet---

Next year BC!

Also need outlets -- need an audience -- need critics.
(e.g. magazines) (aware and interested)

O'Leary Report.
Subsidies

So these are some of the problems that geography and history have bequeathed us.

Now I would like to consider the curious fact that in spite of all this we do have a recognizably distinct body of literature. Not a large body, and not a strongly nationalistic one, but a considerable volume of good writing which has the flavour of our experience as Canadians. I think you will recognize it as your own when you hear it. I want to illustrate it today from our poets. My illustrations will be from English-Canadian poets only. (The French poets have had less trouble really because they have a natural barrier in the form of language.)

Our first poets, in pre-Confederation days, hardly thought of themselves as Canadians, but they did react to their environment, mostly in a negative way. (Fear of wilderness, savages, animals, unfamiliar flora and fauna.)

e.g. Standish O'Grady

Smith p. 72

A generation later than this, however, on the wave of enthusiasm created by Confederation, a group of talented poets with warm nationalistic feelings turned with pride and a painter's curiosity to the Canadian landscape. Charles G.D. Roberts, Arch Lampman and Bliss Carman have left us some memorable water-colour sketches of the Maritimes and other parts of Canada. Like the paintings of the Group of Seven, however, the landscape poems of the Nature Poets were almost wholly devoid of people. Typically, there is one small figure--a waggoner, a woodcutter, a trapper, or perhaps only the poet himself, dwarfed by the impressive natural phenomena of mountains, great lakes, broad fields, or acres of snow. The theme of loneliness is still present, and, also that of awe--awe rather than fear perhaps. The seasons were a favourite subject of these poets; and one of them--Wilfred Campbell--has captured an experience which is familiar to many Canadians--the very late Fall when everything in the landscape seems to be waiting for the first snowfall.

READ SMITH p. 187

Another of those poets, Frederick George Scott, writes of the finding of a lake, unnamed on the map, among mountains and forests untouched by civilized

man. He is humbled and awed by the ageless grandeur, the solitude and silence of the surroundings, the typical Canadian poet's reaction to the vast wilderness or our northland.

SMITH p. 20

The vogue of nature poetry had passed by 1925. Since that time most good poetry in Canada has been "Modern", that is, urban, intellectual, social realist, or mythic and allusive. It bears little relation in subject matter or imagery to its natural surroundings. Yet there are exceptions. A.J.M. Smith-- a very "cerebral" poet--usually--has written some verses which restate the familiar themes of Canadian nature poets--loneliness, starkness, etc.

QUOTE C. KING p 24 "The Lonely Land"

But even when our contemporary poets are using modern techniques they frequently manage to incorporate aspects of geography peculiar to the Canadian experience. Earle Birney, the West Coast poet, has a fine narrative poem on mountain-climbing in the Rockies. Anne Marriott has given us a most convincing picture of drought on the prairies in her poem "The Wind Our Enemy," and F.R. Scott writes of the North Country in Laurentian Shield.

SEE SMITH, OXFORD BOOK p. 182

We must not forget, either, that well-known poet from the West--the Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan--Sarah Birks. Her major poem is an epic called "Up from the Magma" which she was inspired to write after reading a textbook on Geology. Sarah is purportedly the founder of the Canadian "neo-geo-physical" school of poetry and it is said that her poems have "raised her home province of Saskatchewan to its highest prairie level"--she has "captured in her net of poesy the flatness and alkalinity of that great province." Her epic "Up from the Magma and Back Again" has never been completely read by anyone, partly because it is written in the language of the original Mound Builders--but I woul d like to give you a sample of her other verse. Here is her "Song to the Four Seasons." (PAGE 62) and her paeon to the early days on the prairies-- "Hordes of Sheep" (PAGE 128) .....meant buffalo?.....

Sarah's untimely death was brought about when she bit through a horse-thermometer and died of mercury poisoning. (Prize she won.) Sarah Birks is, of course, a hoax--a mythical character created by P.G. Hiebert to poke fun at those of us who take poetry too seriously.

The next poet I wish to mention managed both to have fun and to take poetry seriously. Our greatest poet--so recently dead--E.J. Pratt, will grow in stature as time goes on. He is our most thoroughly Canadian and our most widely recognized poet. His works span Canada geographically and historically. He began writing lyrics about the sea and his youth in Newfoundland, and he went on to write great narrative poems including the powerful"Bréboeuf and his Brethren"and ending with "Towards the Last Spike", an epic depicting the drama of stringing a railroad across a continent. Always, in Pratt, there is the sense of vastness, of huge elemental forces to be overcome, of the courage and daring and perseverance necessary to conquer distance, elimate and physical barriers such as great mountains, raging waters and wilderness.

Finally, there is a poet of the West Coast, Roy Daniells by name, who has recently published a poem which sums up much of our history and takes into account of our present difficulties. He calls his poem"Tapestry" -- and it is about the whole question of our identity as Canadians. He got his inspiration from seeing the Cluny tapestry of the Unicorn, that mythical beast so beautifully portrayed in threads of coloured silk woven together. Daniells sees Canada as a mythical beast so far waiting to be born, waiting for us to create it.

THE CH. SHADE (START VERSE 3)

July 7, 1964

Wynne Francis